

# THIS IS WHAT HELL ON EARTH LOOKED LIKE

## 14 SCENES OF REMEMBRANCE ON THE 80TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE LIBERATION OF KL AUSCHWITZ PRISONERS



Flag of former concentration camp inmates. 'Concentration Camps Mathausen-Gusen 1939-1945; the Poles'.  
Photo: The Home Army Museum.

In the 1960s, Józefa Chodacka, an artist from Kraków, created unique models to illustrate the life in German extermination camps.

About 42,500 locations associated with the German system of camps and persecution existed in the Third Reich and occupied territories between 1933 and 1945. Six extermination camps were established on Polish soil: Auschwitz, Majdanek, Kulmhof, Treblinka, Sobibór and Bełżec.



Slave labour of prisoners. Photo: The Home Army Museum.

The KL (concentration camp) Auschwitz was the largest of these: no less than 1.1 million Jews were murdered there, as well as tens of thousands of Polish, Roma, and other nationalities. Approximately 18 million people passed through the German camp system, 7.2 million of them losing their lives. Nearly 6,000 camps operated in the occupied Poland, about 6.7 million people died in these, mainly Jews and Poles. The exact numbers of victims are difficult to ascertain as, towards the end of the war, the Germans intensively effaced traces of their deeds.

Everyday life of the prisoners' was extremely hard. The day started with a morning roll call, after which the prisoners set off to do exhausting labour. It included working in quarries, construction of camp infrastructure, warehouse or agricultural work. The lack of appropriate clothing, heavy tools, starvation food rations, and beatings by guards and kapos led to exhaustion and large numbers of deaths. Prisoners also died in very frequent executions and as a result of pseudo-medical experiments. Food rations in the camps were insufficient to the extreme, limited to a slice of bread, some watery soup and rarely margarine, which provided only 700-1000 calories a day, inadequate for the hard labour. Roll calls were often held for many hours after returning from work, and the sleeping huts were cold, damp and cramped.



Prisoners in slave labour. Photo: The Home Army Museum.

Despite such difficult conditions, the prisoners tried to preserve their humanity through secret cultural activities, creating poems, songs, drawings or theatrical plays. Spiritual life played an important role: prayers and religious ceremonies were organised in secret. For many, the faith was a source of hope and strength for survival. Clergy of various denominations supported their fellow prisoners through words of encouragement, prayers, and conversations, which had a significant effect on the morale of the prisoners.



Scene showing SS-Mann mistreating children.  
Photo: The Home Army Museum.

The prisoners of KL Auschwitz were liberated on 27 January 1945. Around 7,000 exhausted prisoners had remained in the camp, whose lives could thus be saved. The liberation became one of the symbols of the end of the German extermination system. The liberating of other camps continued until May 1945, when the Allies freed the last one, at Mauthausen.

In the 1960s, Józefa Chodacka, an artist from Kraków, created unique models to illustrate the life in the camps. They were based on, among others, the memories of two former inmates of KL Auschwitz: Józef Pawlik and Zbigniew Baster, both from Kraków, who had survived the hell of German concentration camps.



Scene showing prisoners in a concentration camp barrack.  
Photo: The Home Army Museum.

Faithful representations of the realities of camp life include, among others, scenes of hard labour, tormenting prisoners by SS men and kapos, prayer and confession, dying in a hut or in a suicidal act of throwing oneself onto the camp barbed wire fence.



The inert body of a prisoner hangs from barbed wire in a German concentration camp.  
Photo: The Home Army Museum.



Camp photograph by Zygmunt Targalski.  
Photo: Auschwitz Museum Archive.

The models, made with great care and attention to detail, include, among other things, a legible camp number 25902 repeated several times. We have established that the number was assigned to Zygmunt Targalski at the KL Auschwitz.

Targalski, born in 1896 in Kraków, was a lawyer and an active member of the "Sokół" ("Falcon") Gymnastics Society. He was arrested by the Gestapo on charges of sabotage on 22 May 1941, and detained at the prison at Montelupich Street in Kraków, and then at the KL Auschwitz. In 1943, he was transferred to the KL Gross-Rosen, and then to the Litomierzycze sub-camp of the KL Flossenbürg. Targalski survived the war, but his post-war fate has not been documented.



Prisoner Zygmunt Targalski beaten by an SS-Mann.  
Photo: The Home Army Museum.

The camp models on display are not only unique as works of art, but also as a priceless, shocking document that realistically shows the everyday life at the "death factories". This vivid image of the camp reality has invaluable educational value, bringing closer in a visual way one of the most nightmarish aspects of World War II: the criminal system of German concentration camps.

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